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SUBJECT: SUMMER WORK TRAVEL PROGRAM CONTINUES TO BE SUCCESSFUL

¶1. SUMMARY. Congen Sao Paulo attended an estimated 7726 students in this year's Summer Work Travel (SWT) season, a 10 percent increase over last year. The vast majority of the students were well-prepared and qualified for the program. Brazilian exchange agencies predict that growth will continue next year. Congen Sao Paulo found that the best way to adapt to the growing SWT market was increased outreach and organization, which allowed agencies and sponsors to better understand the visa process and regulations and the Consulate to better track participants. End Summary.

SWT Program Grows While Maintaining Quality

¶2. In this year's SWT season, Congen Sao Paulo adjudicated the applications of 7226 students over twelve days allocated only to these students and another 500 SWT students scheduled on regular days. This was a 10 percent increase over last year's 7026 students. While Congen Sao Paulo expected to adjudicate 8900 students this year, this estimate proved too high. Brazilian exchange agencies believe that the fall in the exchange rate between the Brazilian real and the U.S. dollar discouraged students, as it was less cost-friendly.

¶3. The majority of the students' SWT visa applications (98.5 percent) were approved. The main reason for visa denials was weak English skills, cited in 63 percent of all denials. Weak university ties, either older students just starting school or students who had skipped several semesters, accounted for 40 percent of all refusals.

¶4. Beginning this year, Mission Brazil enforced standard participation dates from 15 November to 15 March. Congen Sao Paulo experienced good compliance with these dates, with only 18 students denied visas because of dates outside of this range. Conoffs had performed a large amount of outreach to both Brazilian agencies and U.S. sponsors to explain these dates and believe that this was a major factor in increasing compliance.

Brazilian Market is Organized and Booming

¶5. Brazil has a very organized exchange agency market. This year Congen Sao Paulo interviewed students from 34 different agencies located throughout the country. The agencies ranged from small, sending only 11 students, to large, sending over 1700 students. Overall they did an excellent job prescreening students, as evidenced by the 98.5 acceptance rate. The variation in refusal rates by agency was only 2 percentage points.

¶ 6. Brazilian exchange agencies believe that the SWT program will see the most growth of all exchange programs. Demand for the program has been growing strongly over the past 5 years. Many agencies found that they reached the maximum number of students that they could attend this year while maintaining the quality screening and customer service. As the more established agencies begin to slow the pace of recruitment, they predicted that other, possibly less responsible, agencies will open to meet the growing demand.

¶ 7. While many agencies expect the SWT market to continue growing, they note that other opportunities are opening in other countries. Employers in Australia and Canada, in particular, are entering the Brazilian market looking to fill work and travel positions. In addition, with the strict enforcement of the November 15 to March 15 dates this year, many employers moved away from J1 programs to H2B programs. Agencies predict, however, that this move was temporary and that employers will return to J1 programs because of the difficulty in obtaining H2B positions.

Outreach Clarifies Process and Qualifications

¶ 8. Conoffs in charge of the J portfolio focused heavily this year on outreach. Officers attended job recruitment fairs, orientations, and information meetings and held meetings with U.S. sponsors and Brazilian agency representatives, reaching approximately 2000 students, 35 U.S. sponsor and employer representatives, and 12 different exchange agencies. At each opportunity, Conoffs explained the importance of exchange programs to the U.S. government and our

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excitement about the SWT program, as well as how the visa process works and how officers evaluate candidates for this program.

¶ 9. Feedback on outreach efforts was very positive. Agencies and students noted that the visa process was much more transparent this year, students were less nervous, and there was an open channel for communication with the Consulate. Repeated outreach efforts showed tangible results with the third largest exchange agency, which sent over 700 students this year. Last year, this agency had a ten percent refusal rate, this year the rate was only 3.7 percent.

Date Restrictions: Much Ado About Nothing

¶ 10. This year Mission Brasilia implemented standard participation dates from 15 November and 15 March. While Brazilian exchange agencies, U.S. sponsors and employers were initially very worried about the enforcement of the standard participation dates, most agencies agree that they had little impact on the program overall. Alan Pakes, the director of Invista em Voce, an agency that processed about 200 students, said, "The enforcement of these dates helps us convince students to return to classes at the beginning of the next semester."

¶ 11. The main impact of the date restriction was that ski lodges, which had previously recruited heavily in Brazil, decreased the number of positions for Brazilians, as their high season stretches into April. Agencies met Brazilian demand, however, by increasing their spots in other areas, i.e., fast food. Nevertheless, several agencies remain concerned that any further date restrictions could cause a severe decline in demand for Brazilians.

Increased Organization Improves Processes

¶ 12. Congen Sao Paulo also increased its oversight of SWT agencies. In July, we met with the agencies and required them to register and provide contact information and information about recruiting processes in order to participate this year. We also required them to bring two representatives to guide their students through the process. Agencies were given sample folders that showed all required

and recommended documents. Congen Sao Paulo also required that each student bring a letter from their agency, which helped Conoffs to track issuances and refusals. Conoffs gave tours to agency representatives before their interview days, so that they were familiar with the process and could explain it to their students.

¶13. As a result, students were better prepared for their interviews, with the majority of them arriving with documents in order. This allowed for a faster process and less stress. One student commented, "The interview was super calm, not a seven-headed monster."

¶14. Interviewing Conoffs also had more information about individual agencies and their screening processes and monitored refusal rates by agency as the season progressed. We contacted agencies when we noticed a rise in refusal rates and explained why students were refused. Congen Sao Paulo also requires that each agency send a report in April showing how many students applied to their program, how many they accepted, how many received visas, and how many returned at the end of the program. Agencies must account for the status of each student who did not return to Brazil. The Consulate hopes that this encourages agencies to be more accountable for their students.

¶15. COMMENT. The growing SWT program presents a challenge for Congen Sao Paulo, which must accommodate a large number of students in a short period of time. Increased organization and outreach greatly improved this year's season. Students, agencies, and U.S. employers and sponsors had better understanding of the regulations that guide the visa process. Conoffs were able to organize the reserved days to better accommodate agencies and provide increased agency oversight. This contributed to better prescreening and organization by agencies, a decrease in the refusal rate, and an easier work flow. Conoffs hope that these efforts will allow the Consulate to meet the needs of the program as it continues to grow in Brazil. End Comment.

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